

OLD TESTAMENT SURVEY

Lesson 20 – Part 1

Joshua and the Promised Land

When I got out of law school, I started work at one of the ten largest law firms in the United States. This firm had over 800 lawyers and hired about 50 new graduates the year I started. Of those 50, it was estimated that maybe 10 would still be there ten years later. “Making it” was a huge deal to the incoming lawyers.

Unlike the nearly twenty years I had spent in school, work was not on a clear schedule. While it was assumed lawyers would work during the normal working hours of 8:30 to 5, it was unwritten whether the workday should start at 8:30, 8, or even earlier. Likewise, 5 pm was not really “quitting time.”

One of the lawyers that I worked with had been at the firm about seven years when I first started. The more I got to know this lawyer, the more advice he imparted to me. After several months, I walked into his office around 6:30 pm and found him reading a book unrelated to law. Realizing what he was doing had nothing to do with work, and realizing it was 6:30 pm, I asked him why he had not left for home.

He explained to me that of the 800 plus lawyers at the firm, very few would ever really work with him on any project that demonstrated his skills or commitment. He further explained that “perception was reality” and if those lawyers *perceived* that he worked hard, then in their minds, he was a hard worker. So, the key was cultivating the perception.

This attorney, therefore, made a resolution that as long as it was in his power, he would not leave the office until every lawyer senior to him on his floor had already left. That way, all the lawyers would think that he worked longer and harder than any of them.

It was all about perception.

Without speaking to the merits of this lawyer’s work ethic, I want to focus on the role that perception plays in our construct of reality. For example, as we contemplate the Israelites’ invasion of the Promised Land, I suspect that some of us have perceptions that are not necessarily reflective of what the Bible teaches. This is true simply for us working through this lesson; I suspect it is true for many even in the world of scholastic research and writing.

Therefore, as we focus on the interaction between archaeology and the Bible’s account of the Israelites’ settlement of the Promised Land (especially the book of Joshua), we need to first carefully consider what the Bible has to say about the

subject. We need our perceptions of Biblical teaching aligned with the reality of Biblical teaching. This is where we begin this study.

SCHOLASTIC APPROACHES TO ISRAEL'S SETTLEMENT

Historically in the church, the Biblical account of Joshua leading the Israelites through a military invasion of the Promised Land was accepted as factual. During the last several centuries as scientific reasoning has become normative, and as critical Biblical scholarship has arrived in full force, doubts about such a military invasion surfaced in academic literature. With the advent of Biblical archaeology in the late 1800's and into the 1900's, two basic schools of thought emerged.

One school of thought held that Israel settled the Promised Land through military conquest, destroying the Canaanite cities and resettling the land. Prominent scholar William Foxwell Albright was a major advocate of this view. He published a number of academic works and popular works setting out the archaeological record for this view.¹ Other well-known scholars supporting this view include G. Ernest Wright² and John Bright.³

A second school of thought, claiming to be archaeologically based rather than Biblically based, argues that Israel gradually and peacefully assimilated into Canaan taking on a national identity much later. This view generally believes the Bible was constructed to support a national identity, rather than to record any historical conquest. This view can be traced back in various forms to a number of noteworthy scholars including Albrecht Alt,⁴ Martin Noth,⁵ and popular of late, Israel Finkelstein.⁶

¹ Interestingly, Albright came to his view through his participation in archaeology. He did not start his career out with such views. Davis, Thomas W., *Shifting Sands, The Rise and Fall of Biblical Archaeology*, (Oxford 2004). For Albright's own works see, e.g., Albright, W. F., *The Archaeology of Palestine and the Bible*, (Revell 1932); *Archaeology and the Religion of Israel* (Westminster John Knox Press 1956); *The Archaeology of Palestine* (Penguin Books 1960); *History, Archaeology, and Christian Humanism*, (McGraw-Hill 1964).

² See, Wright, George Ernest, *Biblical Archaeology* (Westminster Press 1960).

³ Bright, John, *A History of Israel*, (Westminster John Knox Press 2000), 4th ed.

⁴ Alt, Albrecht, *Essays on Old Testament History and Religion* (Blackwell 1966).

⁵ Noth, Martin, *The History of Israel*, (Harper 1958).

⁶ See, Finkelstein, Israel, *The Archaeology of the Israelite Settlement*, (Jerusalem 1988); and more popularity, *The Bible Unearthed: Archaeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origin of its Sacred Texts* (Simon and Schuster 2001).

Surprisingly, both of these views claim archaeology supports their perspective. How does this happen? What are fair-minded people to make of this? We know that 2 plus 2 is 4. Gravity pulls people down to the ground. H₂O is the chemical makeup of water. Why can't people all look at the same archaeology and decide what it means?

Thomas Davis wrote his dissertation in 1987 at the University of Arizona under one of the most prominent Biblical archaeologists of the last 50 years, William Dever. The subject of the dissertation, which was published in book form by Oxford in 2004,⁷ is the history of Biblical archaeology and the issues underlying its rise and fall. That work is a tremendous resource that provides a thorough explanation of these issues.

Davis explains the early tendency of archaeologists to interpret most all their findings in light of Biblical passages. Often times, this interpretation was proved ultimately wrong, but the early techniques and efforts of archaeological research varied between inefficient and destructive.

With the rise of Darwinism, some in the church felt, especially in America, a need to use archaeology to prove the truth of the Bible. Archaeology became the tool that would prove that Scripture was grounded in historical truth, contrary to assertions of many that believed the Bible to be full of man's thoughts rather than God's.

A further element in the drive to find historical authenticity arose from the German critical movement that used linguistic analysis to argue that the Old Testament was not an ancient historical document, but a relatively late composite of a number of old traditions. It was believed that by finding archaeological support for the ancient stories, there was transferred integrity and authenticity to the record of those events recorded in Scripture.

Those seeking to substantiate Scripture were not the only ones involved in Palestinian archaeology, however. There were many others in the field who subscribed to the beliefs of the skeptics (that the older parts of Scripture likely dated from the 6th century BC forward).

If these different views were not complicating enough, there have been tremendous political overlays on these issues as they involve the Israelite settlement of Canaan. For the questions involving who came first to the land still plague the local populace of Palestinian and Jew today.

⁷ Davis, Thomas W., *Shifting Sands, The Rise and Fall of Biblical Archaeology*, (Oxford 2004).

Now into this arena come the writings of many who have interests vested in one direction or another. Sometimes, the writers make clear their biases. Other times, the bias is less than clear.

For example, Don Benjamin teaches Biblical and Near Eastern Studies at Arizona State University. He has authored several books including one that he uses as a text book entitled, *Stones and Stories: An Introduction to Archaeology and the Bible*.⁸ Ostensibly, his book is an unbiased educational work presenting the various approaches and theories accompanying the study of Biblical archaeology. He carefully explains various hot views as discussion points in a seemingly neutral manner. However, buried throughout the book are his conclusions on subjects that are controversial, and repeatedly he asserts his conclusions as if they were established fact.

In the name of neutrality, we can read Benjamin writing about Biblical archaeology and the history of formative scholars discussed earlier, including Albright, Wright, Bright, Alt, and Noth. In a seemingly dispassionate manner, Benjamin gives a synopsis of the various views about the Israelite settlement in Canaan. He writes:

The Conquest Theory

A long-standing tradition of interpreting the books of Joshua-Judges describes the Hebrews as foreign warriors who invaded Syria-Palestine from the West, the so-called conquest....

The Settlement Theory

In contrast to the theory of Albright [the “Conquest Theory”], Albrecht Alt (1883-1956) and Martin Noth (1902-1960) proposed that the Hebrews peacefully immigrated west from the Jordan River into unsettled areas of Syria-Palestine.⁹

Even though the book seems to be a non-opinionated discourse on the various approaches and opinions of academia, the author inserts in many places his own conclusions of key issues as if they were accepted and established fact. SO, for example, as early as the Preface he writes,

The Hebrews who founded the villages in the hills west of the Jordan River Valley and north of Jerusalem at the beginning of the Iron Age (1200-1100 B.C.E.) were from cities along the coast, not nomads from the desert. What

⁸ Benjamin, Don C., *Stones and Stories: An Introduction to Archaeology and the Bible* (Fortress Press 2009).

⁹ *Ibid.* at 106.

these villagers had in common was that they were the social survivors who fled the famine, plague, and war that brought the Bronze Age to an end. They were not warriors; they were farmers and herders.¹⁰

Benjamin set this conclusion in the middle of his section explaining how he has translated various parts of the Old Testament.¹¹ Now, there is certainly nothing wrong with people writing their views, whether those views support or detract from the veracity of the Bible. The issue noted here is the tendency of some to write as if conclusions were established when in fairness they are open to debate.

We therefore deem it appropriate to first set out the approach and perspective of these lessons on this issue. In writing this lesson, we also strive to clarify where opinion lies versus generally accepted fact.

The approach is simple. We seek to first understand the real teachings of Scripture related to the settlement of Canaan, as opposed to the “perceptions” of many. Having then set out the key points in Scripture that would touch on archaeology, we look at the archaeological evidence and interpretations, weighing the relative merits. Clearly, as has repeatedly been made plain in these lessons, they are written from the pen (okay, computer) of one who believes that the Bible is God’s inspired revelation, not simply man’s musings about God. That will no doubt affect our opinions, but we still try to maintain as much objectivity as possible, confident that truth trumps ideology.

We begin, therefore, with a review of the teachings of the Bible on the settlement of Canaan.

JOSHUA’S ACCOUNT OF THE INVASION

Our look at the actual text of Joshua produces a picture that is somewhat different than the perception of many scholars who have engaged in the invasion/peaceful settlement debate. The perception, which has admittedly become reality for many, is that the Bible teaches that the Israelites came into Canaan and destroyed every city, and killed most every person in their path. This leaves the archaeologists on both sides of the invasion debate looking for evidence of massive destruction that all occurred at the same time historically.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, at XV.

¹¹ On pages 108ff, Benjamin makes the same conclusive assumption and gives a bit more material behind it. Here, he at least adds the modification that “Archaeology suggests...” Still, he provides no explanation of what archaeology leads to his conclusion, nor does he intelligently discuss the other side of the issue and the opinions of others.

When many of these scholars fail to find such evidence, they dismiss the Bible as historically unreliable. When others find evidence of destruction, they immediately use it as evidence of reliability.

A careful review of the text, however, shows that the text never says that Israel invaded the Promised Land and destroyed the people and the cities in their path. We must understand what the text actually claims to fairly analyze and compare the archaeological finds.

Joshua breaks into several natural divisions that help us place this study into context.

I. Preparation for the invasion (1:1 - 5:15).

II. The invasion (6:1 - 12:24).

- a. Jericho (6:1-27).
- b. Ai (7:1- 8:35).
- c. Gibeonite treaty (9:1-27).
- d. Five Amorite kings (10:1-28).
- e. Southern Canaan (10:29-43).
- f. Hazor (11:1-16).
- g. Northern Canaan (11:17-23).

III. Summaries (12:1 – 13:6).

IV. Inheritance allotments among the tribes (13:6 – 21:45).

V. Final interactions among the Israelites and death of Joshua (22:1 – 24:33).

A quick review of the above outline already gives a good indicator of what a closer reading of the Bible relates. We see the first five chapters dedicated to the preparation for invading and settling the Promised Land. Joshua is commissioned to succeed Moses and he assumes command. He then sends out spies that are hidden by Rahab, a harlot in Jericho. After the spies return, Israel crosses the Jordan, which God parts much as he did the Red Sea. The people memorialize this latest miracle of God and then spend time circumcising all the males that were born in the wilderness wanderings. The Passover is celebrated, and only then does the first battle story begin.

Three full chapters are dedicated to the fight against just two cities, Jericho and Ai. One-half a chapter relates the fight against five kings that joined together and

another half-chapter for the battle for Hazor. Otherwise, the entire invasion is covered in 21 verses. That is it! That is the entire invasion—Jericho, Ai, Hazor, and five kings out in the open. Beyond that, there is a conclusive note about areas conquered (the 21 verses).

The Bible gives details for the battles over only three towns (Jericho, Ai, and Hazor). The rest of the invasion data is relatively non-descript. The three detailed towns are all basically destroyed, while there is no such indication that any other town or village in Canaan is destroyed.

Jericho

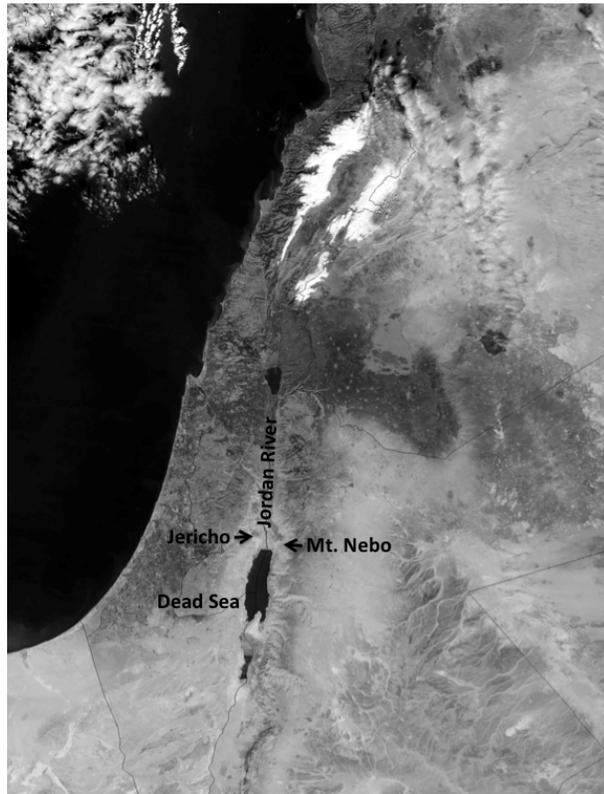
The battle for Jericho is well known to children who are in Sunday school or Vacation Bible School.

Jericho is the first town that the Israelites approached under the leadership of Joshua. It is an ancient town was built around an oasis on the west side of the Jordan River before it dumps into the Dead Sea.

One of the oldest towns known, some hunting ruins and remains have been dated back to 12,000 BC. Shelter bases dating from 8700 to 8500 BC have also been identified.¹²

Scripture details that this town was “shut up inside and outside” and that “none went out and none came in” (Josh. 6:1). The LORD commanded Joshua to march in a certain formation around the city for six days. On the seventh day, the march was to encircle the city seven times followed by priests blowing horns. The people then were to shout and, according to the song, “the walls of Jericho came a tumblin’ down.”

Even within that song, however, we see a misperception that has crept in from a lack of careful reading of the Biblical account. The Bible reports that a wall –



¹² Meyers, Eric M., ed., *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Archaeology in the Near East*, (Oxford 1997), Vol. 3 at 221.

singular—would/did come down (Josh. 6:5, 20). We cannot safely infer that all walls fell.¹³

The Israelites “devoted all in the city to destruction” (Josh. 6:21). This included all the people that remained in the city as well as the oxen, sheep and donkeys (excluding Rahab and her family). The Israelites then burned the city, and Joshua pronounced a curse on any who would rebuild it.

Ai

Archaeology has not conclusively produced the site that is Ai, although many considered “et-Tell” the appropriate location. We do know from Scripture that it was a town near Bethel (Josh. 12:9).

Ai was the location that was a stumbling effort by the Israelites. Their first attempt at capturing the small town failed, with about 36 Israelites getting killed. The reason for the failure was the sin of Achan who had grabbed some of the bounty set aside for the Lord and hidden it for his own. Once that sin was rooted out and dealt with, God delivered the town of Ai into the hands of the Israelites.

The ultimate battle involved not just the men of Ai but also of nearby Bethel. The Israelites set a trap and drew the men away from Ai, thinking they were chasing a fleeing Israelites army. A second set of Israelites hidden behind the city then went in and set the city aflame. As the chasing Ai men saw their city in flames, they turned back only to find themselves at that point surrounded by the two divisions of Israelites.

The account then says that Ai was “burned” and made “forever a heap of ruins, as it is to this day” (Josh. 8:28).

Hazor

Hazor is a readily identified large city (by ancient Canaanite standards) located 9 miles north of the Sea of Galilee. We are not given too great a detail of the conquering of that city, but we are told that Joshua “burned Hazor with fire” taking the spoils of the city (Josh. 11:11).

Other Invasion Information

In Joshua 10, we are given the battles against five local leaders (“kings”) who joined forces to stem the Israelite advances into Canaan. The kings marched to Gibeon, a town that had made peace with Israel. Hearing of the coming assault

¹³ Indeed, we are also told in the story that Rahab’s house was built into one of the city’s walls, and her home’s inhabitants were ensured safety. From this, we might infer that it is likely the wall around her house withstood falling.

against Gibeon, Joshua marched his troops into battle against the kings. This battle was not a city fight, but one in the countryside. As the battle was favoring Israel, the kings fled to a cave where Joshua kept them trapped until he finished beating their armies. Joshua then had the kings pulled from the cave and killed.

Following this, Joshua defeated seven different enumerated towns. There is no recorded destruction of the town structures, but mere mention of killing those who stayed in the towns in defiance of Joshua.

Joshua 11 then addresses the battles of Northern Canaan. Aside from the 15 verses dedicated to the win over Hazor discussed above, this chapter, along with chapter 12, gives summary statements of kings and towns Joshua defeated. Again, though, no account is given of these cities being razed or destroyed.

Where does that leave the Biblical narrative? If the stones could speak, then what would the stones say about the account as given in Scripture? We would certainly see destruction of some kind in Jericho, Ai, and Hazor. Beyond that we would see the existence of these other towns mentioned in the text.

But, would we expect to see all cities in Canaan destroyed? Certainly not! As an aside, we might add that while there was a clear instruction to destroy the three cities referenced above, it makes sense that most cities would not be destroyed. Many of the Israelites would, no doubt, be dwelling in these cities. Why tear down walls just to rebuild them the next day? This is especially true as we realize that the generations of Israelites were those who had dwelled in tents all their lives.

Similarly, the text seems to indicate that those people opposing Joshua were defeated as noted. But the many who likely fled ahead of the Israelites, the people in the fields and farms who did not fight, they would have likely survived. The succeeding history given in the next book of Judges certainly teaches that there were a number of other non-Israelites still inhabiting the area.

Based then on the Biblical account, we would expect to find evidence of Israelite co-occupation of the land. In fact, even with the cities, the Israelites did not capture all of them in the lifetime of Joshua. Chapter 13 of the book details a substantial area with a number of peoples and kings still unconquered by the time Joshua was too aged to fight.

Where does this leave us in the archaeological analysis? We need to spend time understanding what archaeological work has been done, and the impact of that work on the issues presented by the Biblical text. We then hope to make intelligent observations about the various views given by scholars, finding those that make most sense.

CONCLUSION

As we anticipate next week, we can put together a “Wish List” of things we would want to find (and to some extent expect to find) in the archaeological record. This list contains those matters consistent with our Biblical discussion.

Wish List

1. Find archaeological evidence of the cities/towns of Jericho, Ai, and Hazor, along with the towns listed in the summary narratives set out earlier.
2. Evidence of destruction of Jericho, Ai, and Hazor in the time frame of Israelite invasion.
3. No other mass destruction of the other Canaanite towns mentioned in Joshua narratives.
4. Evidence of Israelites as people in Canaan by 1200 BC. (This date is based on the chronology being used in the Exodus from earlier lessons).
5. Evidence of other Canaanites in and around the towns of Canaan in the age of Israelite settlement and afterwards.
6. No real evidence of a large-scale invasion should exist (like we find with Alexander the Great, the Roman invasion, etc.).

This list is not complete. There are many others that might be named. But this gives a good basis for the next week of this lesson when we begin to dissect the archaeological digs and analyze the reported findings. We will also consider the arguments of those who deny the historicity of the Biblical accounts.

POINTS FOR HOME

1. “*The wall of the city will fall down flat*” (Josh. 6:5).

One of the hardest things to do is to look past blind spots, especially those that are made by perceptions rather than careful examination. Before we sit harshly in judgments over Scripture (or anything else for that matter!), we do well to carefully consider the matter. Jumping to conclusions is a good way to conclude wrongly! Make a decision today to reread Scripture with a careful eye, asking God to reveal new or fresh matters to you.

2. “*And the LORD said...go up to Ai*” (Josh. 8:1).

The eternal faith fight, the fight from the Garden of Eden itself, often starts with the question, “Did God actually say...” (Gen. 3:1). The challenge is

out there because the question is legitimate. If God did not say it, then we are fools to believe he did. If he did say it, however, we err in following the questions of one who would rightly then be called “the deceiver.”

It is important that we see faith grounded not just in historical events as reality, but in the words of God. I am not suggesting that archaeology becomes the apologetic aid that demonstrates the reasonableness of faith as against unbelief. Rather, I am saying that historicity is part and parcel of a valid and vibrant faith that knows that God’s message today is worth living and dying for. So as you read the Scriptures, do so with an affirmation that says, “Yes, God did actually say...”

3. *“Jericho was shut up...because of...Israel. None went out, and none came in”* (Josh 6:1).

Common sense is a term familiar to us all. There are things in Scripture that make common sense, yet we often fear using our common sense. We also have a tendency to hold experts in awe and are hesitant to test and try their ideas and theories. This is true just as much when the expert agrees with us as when the expert does not. It is appropriate to seek to understand, to study, to challenge, and to discuss these things. It is what the church did in Acts 15 as it sought to reason through the theology and practicalities of an increasingly Gentile church. Yet, the lesson in Acts 15 includes seeking to understand with prayerful involvement of God’s Spirit as well counsel from other godly people.

Do not simply follow a crowd, but seek God’s wisdom through personal study, godly counsel, and even common sense, especially when addressing the ideas of those with agendas!

WANT MORE?

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